



Special Contribution

Miranda's Promise: A student intern's dermatology diary, January 22, 2004

Caitlin Elena Stiglmeier

PO Box 2099
Lihue, HI 96766
Email: cstiglm@linfield.edu

I am a third-year premedical student at a small liberal arts college in Oregon. As part of my academic experience I was lucky enough to spend the month of January 2004 in the office of a small-town dermatologist. The same day I became Dr. Stiglmeier, I began a journal in which I recorded pertinent information about each patient I encountered, such as the reasons for their love of dolphins, how they trapped rubidium at absolute zero, and their many different uses for Bag Balm® (Dairy Association Co. Inc., Lyndonville, VT, USA). This eclectic collection of random information allowed a connection between us, a chance to live vicariously through the patients' words, if only for a moment. I recorded other, perhaps less important, things too: the real reason they came to the clinic, my diverse feelings and moods that changed with each new patient encounter. The following is an entry from a typical day during my second week.

I'm supposed to be writing everyday about what I'm learning, what I'm experiencing, what I'm *living*. This week, I've been busy, lazy, often overwhelmed, and tired. That's because I've been paying attention. I've been sitting with people all day long, all week. I've been snipping, and cutting; peering, poking, prodding, stroking, touching, consoling, soothing. And, I've been listening. Listening to stories told from memories ingrained in the minds of people who I may never see again. Listening to body language, to stories, worries, and concerns that aren't told completely with words, trying to decipher reasons why their bodies are reacting to the ideas and stresses that plague their minds.

This week has proven to be a test. Could I really do this everyday? All day? For the rest of my life? Could I go to sleep at night, even if I knew I didn't do all I could have to help someone? I know I'm not ready for it now, but I hope someday I am. Through these first two weeks, I've learned more than I ever imagined I would have. I've learned that:

- It pays to be well-read and well-informed
- It pays more to have a sense of humor
- Appearances are deceiving
- Everyone deserves a chance to be heard
- A smile can be truly amazing
- People become an open book once we find a common thread
- As people grow older, they worry more about their health and less about what others think of them
- People may appear joyful on the outside, but often harbor deep pain on the inside
- A man can be joyful even though his wife is dying
- With a hundred acres and some sheep, you learn how to farm
- A benign seborrheic keratosis isn't as exciting as it sounds
- There are some 92-year olds who are, in a good way, "full of the devil"
- Going to the right school doesn't necessarily make you right in the mind and heart
- It is important to give people the same attentiveness, energy, and affection, whether they have the first appointment of the day or the last
- Life is like a smorgasbord, you don't want to get stuck on the first dish, but you can always come back to it for seconds
- It is better to create than to improvise
- Very often an unattractive exterior can distract someone from the gorgeous interior
- Touch can comfort and heal just as much, if not more, than any prescription
- People are impressed with knowledge, yes, but even more so with a genuine smile and a gentle heart
- If allowed, people will find any excuse to freak out
- There seem to be themes for each day ... I'm not especially fond of the ones like "scabies-day"

- A topic that may seem trivial to you is something a person's whole life may revolve around. It's real to them.
- Knowing how to do a 3-mm punch biopsy, to hold scissors correctly, to tie stitches, to keep gauze sterile, to do a fungal hyphae scraping, what a scabies mite really looks like, and the difference between psoriasis and eczema are also relevant to the job
- Purgatory for a dermatologist is dropping a tiny specimen on a carpeted floor
- There are no accidents, only appointments
- Without patients, there is no need for doctors

Freedom from the clinic allows me to run along the quiet village roads, where this is no escape from the bitter cold. The chilling air is strangely reviving to this wahine from the Islands, and my pace automatically quickens from the thoughts flying through my head. The images and words from the day morph into poetry I repeat in my head to the rhythm of my pounding heart. At this point in my life, medicine holds the promise of Miranda:

*O, Wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't.*¹

Reference:

1. Shakespeare W. The Tempest. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955, Act V, Scene i.

Biography of CAITLIN ELENA STIGLMEIER

I am white. I am German, Swedish, Irish, and English. I am Hawaiian. I am Korean, Chinese, Samoan, Filipino, Tongan, and Tahitian. I am Japanese. I am Italian, French, Slovenian, and Swiss.

I am white because of my skin color. I am German, Swedish, Irish, and English because that's the blood that flows through my veins, the genes I inherited from generations of lineage.

I am Hawaiian because that is my home. I was born on October 20, 1983 on Kauai, Hawaii and have had the astounding luck to live in the same house my whole life. I am the product of adventures through hidden valleys laden with dark, damp soil that smelled of life hidden beneath it – following no trail and leaving none behind as we weaved our way across mountains, my family and I. I am Korean, Chinese, Samoan, Filipino, Tongan, and Tahitian because of the constant influences of those cultures I received growing up. Some of you may have gone to Little League practice after school – I learned kanji, how to hula at seven, and the importance of a leash while surfing. At the age of 10, I announced that I was going to become a pediatrician. It hasn't changed since.

I am Japanese because at 15, I “ran away from home” to what would turn out to be my second home – Moriyama, Japan. A year of my life was spent immersed in Kyoto studying the language, the many ancient art forms, imprinting the deep-rooted culture upon my heart. It was there I was enveloped into my host family's lives, their hearts, and the many folds of their ancient kimonos. To describe how that experience changed me and what it meant to me would take volumes; some of it may never be expressed with words. But it did open my eyes, as well as my heart, to all the possibilities that the world holds. It's amazing what each corner of the world can hold in its quaint entirety.

I am Italian, French, Slovenian, and Swiss because of the opportunity I had to study there for a month through a college course. Linfield College somehow found me and now the tiny town of McMinnville, OR has the feeling of home as well. It too, after four years of late-night chemistry labs, friendships that have given new meaning to the word, 1:00 a.m. covert operations to wreak any possible “legal” havoc on campus, has left an imprint on my life as well. I've learned that we're never going to get less busy, so we might as well seize all opportunities now.

I am also the product of the ocean, of the many trails I have woven through mountains and valleys too numerous to mention. In the few spare moments that I do have, I try to spend outdoors. Surfing has proved to be the perfect combination of serenity and frustration, but the ocean never disappoints me. If I'm not training for the track team, the foothills of McMinnville offer a peaceful tranquility amidst the silent fog.

I am also ready. I am ready to travel to Southeast Asia in January 2005 in order to develop a better sense of the way these countries are incorporating modern healthcare into traditional practices, although I'm not sure I'm ready for the poverty and lack of care I'm bound to find there. I am ready to graduate with a degree in biology, ready to take on the demands and rewards of becoming a medical student and, someday, a doctor. Through a dermatology internship I did in January 2004, I was reminded why I wanted to be a doctor in the first place, although it might not have been clear to me when I was 10, or when I was enshrouded in chemistry assignments. Becoming a doctor is the opportunity to look at the inner workings of the body in connection with the mind and soul, the ability to literally “get under someone's skin,” and fix the broken parts. It's the intimate relationship that is formed between patient and doctor, the honor and respect physicians receive when they are allowed to examine a patient, both internally and externally. It's the lessons we as health professionals learn from the patients that are equally as important as the care we provide. Someday, I'll be ready to incorporate my love for travel and adventure with my career as a doctor, carrying Good News and healing, in their various forms, to the people of the world.



Caitlin being attentive to the last patient of the day.